

Secretary of the Defence Department

Mr Dennis Richardson AO has advised me that he wishes to tender his resignation as Secretary of the Department of Defence with effect from 12 May 2017.

Mr Richardson has had a long and distinguished career and has made a significant contribution to Australia's national security and foreign policy over 48 years of public service. He was appointed as Secretary of Defence in 2012 having served previously as the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2010-2012), Australian Ambassador to the United States of America (2005-10) and the Director-General of Security (1996-2005). He previously worked in the Departments of Immigration and Prime Minister and Cabinet, and served as principal adviser to Prime Minister Hawke from 1990 to 1991.

In this near half century of service, Mr Richardson has served twelve Prime Ministers with consistent professionalism. His commitment to public service, his strategic insight, his candour and integrity have made him a trusted adviser to Governments from both sides of Australian politics. On behalf of the Government and the Australian people, I thank Mr Richardson for his leadership and service and I wish him and his wife, Betty, all the very best for the future.

Brendan Sargeant, Associate Secretary, will be Acting Secretary pending the appointment of Mr Richardson's successor.

Beijing under siege by catkins



Willow catkins shroud parked vehicles and a fruit vendor on Huixin Dongjie in Beijing's Chaoyang district on Monday. [Photo/China Daily]

The Beijing municipal government is looking at ways to deal with the masses of willow and poplar catkins—pollenating flowers—blowing throughout the city.

Though a small number of the fluffy pods may elicit a romantic mood, too many can cause problems with traffic, street cleaning and allergic people.

To solve the problem, the Beijing Municipal Landscape and Forestry Bureau said it will trim and thin trees, and treat 400,000 willow and poplar trees with chemicals this year to limit their catkin production. It will also replace willow and poplar trees with other kinds of trees to gradually reduce the problem.

In addition, it will use high-pressure water jets to reduce floating catkins and has asked the urban cleaning department to clear away the debris in a timely manner.

According to the bureau, Beijing has 2 million poplar and willow trees, which produce a large number of catkins for about a month every spring.

Shen Guofang, a forestry expert and an academican at the Chinese Academy of Engineering, said catkins cannot be dealt with simply by cutting the trees.

“The ecological benefits from full-grown trees far out-weigh the annoyance caused by catkins,” he said. “If we cut them, the city’s natural environment will be damaged.”

Willows and poplars account for 5.4 percent of the city’s green trees, according to the bureau.

Liu Xiuchen, a consultant for the State Council who has worked in the gardening and landscape industry for decades, said that in the 1950s the government didn’t have enough money to spend on greening in the capital, so the low-cost and fast-growing poplars and willows became the best choice at that time and were widely planted.

Poplars and willows produce catkins as part of their reproduction process. The city government will stop using female poplar and willow trees to limit the number, the bureau said.

[Key forum to rally support for Belt and Road Initiative](#)



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (C) and Wang Xiaotao (L), deputy head of the National Development and Reform Commission, attend a press conference on the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, capital of China, April 18, 2017. [Photo/Xinhua]

China is counting on an upcoming forum to build support for its Belt and Road Initiative, a Chinese solution to global economic blues.

Next month, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation will convene in Beijing.

The gathering meets an increasingly urgent need for a new cooperation platform that brings countries together to pull the world out of the economic mire and inject fresh energy into interconnected development.

The world experienced the worst economic hardships last year since the global financial crisis, with a 13-percent drop in foreign direct investment and weak trade growth.

"We do not lack the resources or ability to address our problems, but the current fragmented and exclusive international cooperation model makes it difficult to integrate resources," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Tuesday at a press briefing.

A new platform is needed to explore ways of cementing economic recoveries, creating new growth and improving infrastructure, Wang said.

The two-day forum starting May 14 may go some way to showing that the initiative proposed by China in 2013 can do that job.

The Belt and Road Initiative aims to become a transnational network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, promoting common development among all countries involved. The meeting is expected to translate the ambitious blueprint into solid progress and turn a new page on the initiative.

Thus far, 28 heads of state and government leaders have confirmed their attendance at the forum. Other delegates include officials, entrepreneurs, financiers and reporters from 110 countries, and representatives of 61 international organizations.

Wang expects the results of the forum to range from consensus building to specific measures on implementation. China expects to sign agreements with around 20 countries and 20 organizations at the event.

Cooperation and win-win development will lie at the core of the forum.

"The Belt and Road has become the most important public good China has provided to the world. It was first proposed by China but now is for all countries to enjoy," Wang said.

Since 2013, China has invested more than 50 billion U.S. dollars in Belt and Road countries. A total of 56 economic and trade cooperation zones have already been built by Chinese businesses there, generating nearly 1.1 billion

dollars in tax revenue and creating 180,000 local jobs.

“China is upbeat about the initiative in boosting mutual development and is willing to channel more energy into it,” Wang said, adding that China’s transformation and opening up will provide more opportunities.

Meanwhile, he called for concerted efforts from counties involved, saying that beneficiaries will in return inject vitality into the regional development in the future.

“We do not need ‘lone heroes’ but partners who pull together in times of trouble,” Wang said. The initiative is not a solo performance.

Wang compared the Belt and Road to “a circle of friends” open to all countries that share the same goals, rather than an exclusive club, saying that China has no intention of drawing geographical boundaries to areas covered by the initiative.

“As long as the spirit of the Belt and Road is recognized... everyone can enjoy its opportunities,” he said.

[Radio interview with Kim Landers, ABC AM](#)

KIM LANDERS:

New visa arrangements start today to limit which jobs will be open to skilled workers from overseas.

While the Federal Government says its abolishing 457 visas it will still allow employers to bring in foreign skilled workers under two new classes of visa. But it will tighten the rules and scrap many of the job categories that could previously be filled by overseas workers. The Government is also expected to announce a training package soon to help ensure more Australians are capable of filling those jobs. For more, the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull joins me on the line now. Prime Minister good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning.

KIM LANDERS:

How many Australians will get jobs as a result of these tighter restrictions on foreign workers?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well certainly there will be more opportunities for Australians to get jobs. The reality is that we have to make sure that Australian jobs are for Australians first and foremost. This is about putting Australians first, Australian jobs first, Australian values first.

KIM LANDERS:

Well you say you're doing it to promote jobs for Australians so do you have a rough idea of how much employment it might create?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well what it will do, it will ensure that employers have to put Australians first. At the moment they don't have to in most cases advertise or do market testing, it'll ensure that they will seek to find Australians to fill those jobs and we've taken hundreds of occupations off the skills list, off the 457 list, of course we are abolishing the 457s as you said and this will mean that there will be more jobs available for Australians but above all this is about putting Australians and their jobs first.

KIM LANDERS:

How many people will come in under the new visas because there are about 95,000 people here on 457s at the moment, so how many under these two new categories?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there will be less and they will stay for less time. At the moment the 457s come in for four years and they are able to be renewed within Australia. Under the new arrangements there will be a short term skills visa for two years and it can only be renewed once. And then the person holding it has to go back to their home country and if their employer wants them to come back they've got to reapply from overseas. There'll be a medium term skills visa with less than 200 occupations on it so really that's more than 400 less than is currently on the 457-

KIM LANDERS:

But you're not putting any cap on the number of people that could come in under these visas?

PRIME MINISTER:

If you just let me finish, and they will come in for four years and so that is for strategic skill shortages. In terms of the absolute number of people, it will depend obviously on the demands of the economy and on skill shortages but you see we've got two objectives here; one is to ensure that wherever an Australian is available to fill an Australian job vacancy, the Australian fills it.

The second thing is to ensure that we do not have skills gaps identified or occupations identified where there isn't a skill gap.

The third thing is to make sure that we are training Australians to do Australian jobs and we'll be saying more about the training fund arrangements in the Budget but what we want to make sure is that where there are long and enduring skill shortages in Australia, that Australians are being trained to do that work. It's all about putting Australians first, their jobs first, our values first.

KIM LANDERS:

Prime Minister if we look at some of the specific sectors. Why are cooks and chefs still on the list?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well they're on the list plainly because employers are saying they can't find Australians to do the work.

KIM LANDERS:

We can't train any Australians to do those jobs?

PRIME MINISTER:

That is exactly my point, I'm glad you raised it. That is one of the enduring skills gaps and that is where we need to make sure that our training fund is focused on and employers are focused on, training Australians to do that work.

KIM LANDERS:

Can you tell us how much companies applying to bring in foreign workers are going to have to pay into this national fund to train those Australian workers to fill skill shortages?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, that will all be announced in the Budget. The arrangements of the training fund will be announced in the Budget, the visa charges for the visas, you know to apply for the visas, will be around \$1200 for the two year, \$1150 for the short term stream and \$2400 for the medium term stream.

KIM LANDERS:

So on this training fund would companies have to pay a fee depending on their size?

PRIME MINISTER:

All of the details Kim will be announced in the Budget.

KIM LANDERS:

Are you going to tighten the evidence that employers have to give that they've tested the market, that they can't get Aussie workers and therefore

they need a foreign worker?

PRIME MINISTER:

The labour market testing will be rigorously applied and employers will have to demonstrate that they have advertised over the previous six-month period and that they have acted, you know they have used in good faith their very best efforts to find Australians to do the work. And we'll-

KIM LANDERS:

And how are you going to check on those, sorry, how are you going to check on those failed recruitment efforts because there's previously been some criticism that that sort of market testing is very easy to evade.

PRIME MINISTER:

I know there has been, and we'll be making sure that, the Department will make sure and the Minister will make sure that the employers are held to their commitment. If they want people to come in under the replacement for the 457 Visas, under the new visas, then they have to demonstrate that their market testing has worked. And if they fail to meet their requirements, details of their failure will be published. We are going to be very transparent about this.

KIM LANDERS:

So you're going to name and shame them, but would there be financial penalties for employers who incorrectly use these two new visas?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well if, where employers breach their obligations then they won't be able to get further people in under visas. So, look, employers have a vested interest in complying with the law. Kim, this is a, I recognise that there are a lot of people who will try to criticize this on political grounds and I've heard a bit of that on the ABC already this morning, trying to treat this as a political issue. This is not about politics, this is about putting Australians first, making sure Australians get Australian jobs first and making sure we defend Australian values in doing so.

KIM LANDERS:

Well talking about the politics, the US President Donald Trump has just signed a Buy American, Hire American executive order today. Does it bother you that your announcement is being described as Trumpesque?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well this announcement has followed on a very careful policy development process going back well over a year. It's been carefully considered by Cabinet weeks ago, it's gone through all of the processes, all of our processes. So this is a carefully considered decision that has been

developed and it reflects our policy of putting Australians and Australian jobs first. And you know commentators can make whatever comparisons they like but my Government is committed to putting Australians and Australian jobs first.

KIM LANDERS:

Back in March 2013 the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced that her Government was tightening the 457 program and you tweeted at that time that her attack on 457s strikes at the heart of skilled migration systems. So what's changed?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well look I'm glad that you're analyzing tweets from four years ago but I'm focused on governing Australia today. And I'm putting Australian jobs first, Australians for Australian jobs first. And what we have seen and we saw it particularly under the Labor government and particularly under Bill Shorten's time as Employment Minister is a shocking abuse of the temporary skilled migration program. Bill Shorten was an Olympic champion in issuing 457 Visas. Do you know, in three years, Kim I know this might be disagreeable to you but let me give you some facts. In the three years of the last term of the Gillard Government, Labor increased 457 Visa holders by two thirds. They claimed and Shorten claims today it was all about the mining boom, do you know what? Less than 10 per cent of them went into the mining sector – most went...

KIM LANDERS:

Well Prime Minister let me ask you something about your plans, let me ask you something about your plans –

PRIME MINISTER:

... Sydney and Melbourne.

KIM LANDERS:

Let me ask you something about your plans. These changes also affect the path to residency and citizenship. The Financial Review is reporting that there will be a provisional visa before someone is granted permanent residency and that would give people restricted access to social security. Is that true?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I'm not going to comment on that report. I'd just simply focus on the fact that under the, the temporary the two temporary stream visas, the two-year visa and the four-year medium term visa. Under the two-year visa there is not a pathway to permanent residence. Under the four-year visa, the people can apply after they've been here for three years obviously they've then got to meet other requirements. But it is a, but what we are doing is clearly protecting Australian jobs and Australian values by ensuring that people who

come in under these streams have a higher standard of English that they've obviously had a proper criminal check and that they've had work experience-

KIM LANDERS:

OK look I'm -

PRIME MINISTER:

Do you know at the moment you can get a 457 Visa without ever, that could be your first job?

So you could come from a foreign country without any work experience, come to Australia-

KIM LANDERS:

Prime Minister -

PRIME MINISTER:

Displace an Australian who is actually got work experience.

KIM LANDERS:

Prime Minister let me ask you about something else. There is a report today that an Iraqi military unit with US and Australian advisers has been hit by an Islamic State group chemical attack. How many Australians were involved?

PRIME MINISTER:

This is my, my advice right at the moment is that no Australian troops were affected by the chemical attack but Australian troops, Australian forces did provide assistance following the attack. Now that's my current advice, received literally in the last few minutes.

KIM LANDERS:

On North Korea, you've said it's time for Beijing to end this reckless threat. Are you overestimating the extent of China's influence over Pyongyang?

PRIME MINISTER:

Ah no, I'm not. I've been discussing this issue with Chinese officials for years. I've been discussing it with Chinese leaders both Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, and the Foreign Minister Wang Yi for that matter since I've been Prime Minister. China is the country with by far the most leverage over North Korea.

Now I recognise and the Chinese will say that Kim Jong-un is difficult to deal with, they will say that you know, that he is not somebody that they can direct or you know order around but they, I think China does find the North Korean regime frustrating. But the fact of the matter is Kim, that China has

got, can if it wishes to, it can cut off North Korea's economic lifeline to the world. It has the leverage and the eyes of the world are on Beijing.

KIM LANDERS:

Okay Prime Minister –

PRIME MINISTER:

So it is on Beijing to step up and stop this reckless, dangerous regime threatening the peace of the region and the world.

KIM LANDERS:

Okay Prime Minister we're out of time, thank you very much for speaking to AM.

[ENDS]

[Xi orders new PLA units to be combat ready](#)

President Xi Jinping asked People's Liberation Army commanders on Tuesday to focus on strengthening their unit's combat capability following the establishment of 84 large units.

Xi, also chairman of the Central Military Commission, met commanders of these new units at the commission's headquarters in Beijing.

The new units must prepare themselves for combat and study wars. They should concentrate on improving their joint operation capabilities and technology level, Xi said.

The president also told the new forces to conduct more combat exercises and give priority to building "new-type" fighting capabilities.

In PLA terminology, new-type fighting capabilities generally refers to capabilities of engaging in electronic, information and space operations.

All 84 of the new units are at combined corps level, which means their commanders have or soon will be promoted to a rank of either major general in the Ground Force, Air Force and Rocket Force or rear admiral in the Navy. Though the PLA has not disclosed how these units were set up, it is likely that they were created through the regrouping of existing forces rather than recruiting new personnel, because the Chinese military is still engaged in cutting its troops by 300,000.

The units' emergence also indicates the PLA's structural shake-up has taken

effect. At a Central Military Commission conference in December, Xi ordered the military's structure to be adjusted and optimized, calling for a smaller but capable and flexible military.

The establishment of the units is the latest move in a massive reform the PLA is undergoing. That unprecedented reform began in November 2015, when the Central Military Commission unveiled a blueprint for the PLA's development. The commission pledged to establish a leaner and more efficient command chain, to reduce the number of noncombatant personnel and departments and to build the PLA into a mightier force capable of winning modern wars.

Since then, the PLA has set up a headquarters for its Ground Force, founded a Strategic Support Force dedicated to electronic, information and space operations, and established a Rocket Force to replace the former Second Artillery Corps.

The previous four top PLA departments—staff, politics, logistics and armaments—were dismantled.